

SOME RELIGIOUS TENDENCIES  
IN  
TWENTIETH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY

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SOME RELIGIOUS TENDENCIES  
IN  
TWENTIETH CENTURY ENGLISH POETRY.

O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O-O

Nature and  
Scope of This  
Discussion.

In the consideration of such a subject as the one selected for this discussion, it would appear that anything is admissable which has to do with religion, with the broadest possible definition of that term, insofar as these things appear in the poetry written in the English tongue since the opening of the twentieth century. The clearest expression of "orthodox" Christianity which has been made in English poetry during this period would be germane to the discussion; the most emphatic deviation from or opposition to Christianity would be admissible; paganism, Buddhism, or any form of religion, monotheistic, polytheistic or atheistic, might be considered as proper material for such a discussion.

But no such broad field is in view in this thesis. The effort herein is only to show some of the tendencies apparent in the English poetry of today.

In the first place, it would be manifestly

impossible to cover the entire field of religion as expressed in the English poetry of the present century. Too much material is being produced to be adequately discussed within the limits of this thesis. Much of this material it would be difficult if not impossible to secure, within the time limit which must be set for such a thesis. The author of a single book on the poetry of the present century considers over one hundred living poets worthy of discussion in its pages, and the work of no single one of these is entirely without religious significance. Besides, a new volume comes off the press every few days, so that an exhaustive and up-to-date discussion of the religious element in the English poetry of today seems manifestly impossible.

And for the purpose of such an effort as this it is probably not desirable. The effort will be rather to present some of the tendencies which seem most significant, leaving the fuller consideration of the subject to others who may desire to go into the matter more extensively.

What is  
Religion?

The word "religion" is extremely difficult of definition. It is not at all difficult to analyze a given man's

beliefs, professions and practices, and to say of certain of these things that they constitute his religion. But to give a definition which will include all that is meant by the term "religion," and at the same time exclude all that does not properly come under the meaning of the term, is a task which the most expert lexicographer has as yet failed to accomplish perfectly.

There is a sense in which a creed without a god may be considered as truly religious as the monotheism of Jew or Christian or Mohammedan, or the dualism of Zoroaster, or the polytheism of the ancient Greeks. There is a sense in which many literary artists and readers may be said to be worshippers at the shrine of Venus. There is more than a figure of speech in the oft-repeated charge of the pulpit that America is a worshipper of Mammon. Not all the worshippers of Belial lived in an older day; many of them are in the diplomatic service of their countries in the present century. There is a very real sense in which one may say that the fallen angels whom Milton conceived to be the heathen gods of the ancient nations are in the world today and have their worshippers by the million: Moloch, and Chemos, Baal and Ashtaroth, Thammuz and Rimmon, Dagon and Belial, all have their place in the religion of some who live



in the twentieth century.

And it is not at all unlikely that a careful analysis of the poetry and other literature of today would disclose some gods and goddesses whom Milton never knew and Homer never dreamed of. Just what is the religion of Sara Teasdale as it is revealed in her poetry? Just what conception of God does Seeger have? What would be the religious ideal of Sandburg or Giovannitti, if each were to attempt constructively to frame a statement of his religion? These are questions more easily asked than answered.

But it is not the aim of this discussion to consider matters so subtle, and so far removed from "religion" as that word is commonly understood. Rather the effort will be to use a broad definition, but one which relates the term definitely to the matter of human relation with deity.

For a definition sufficiently accurate for the purposes of this discussion, we may refer to the fundamental definition of Webster: "Religion (is) the outward act or form by which men indicate their recognition of a god or of gods having power over their destinies, to whom obedience, service and honor are due; the feeling or expression of human love, fear

or awe of some superhuman and overruling power, whether by profession of belief, by observance of rites and ceremonies, or by the conduct of life." (1)

The derivation of the word matters little for the present purpose. Whether we accept with Cicero the belief that "religion" is derived from "religere" and means "to read over again, as children might con a lesson;" or whether we hold the belief, probably commoner, that the word is derived from "religare" meaning "to bind," we shall probably agree that religion in some form or other is a matter which persistently appears in the minds of all thoughtful men and women, whether they are intentionally calling it up or no; and that "Religion is that bond which connects our lives with God, and lays the sense of obligation upon us. Upon the one side it looks toward conduct; upon another toward observance and worship. Within, its office is to search the heart, that it may remain contrite and humble, and at the same time to uplift and cheer it by assurance of life's kinship with

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(1) Webster's New International Dictionary.

the divine." (1)

Anything related to religion as thus defined may well come within the range of such a discussion as the one at present undertaken, even the most violent opposition to religion as that term is most commonly understood.

Relation Be-  
tween Religion  
and Literature.

It is natural that there should be a close and vital relationship between religion and literature, especially between religion and poetry.

Religion has to do with the deeps of the human spirit, especially on its emotional side. It does not belong exclusively to the emotions, of course. It has to do with the intellect, and has always commanded the deepest thought of many men. It finds its ultimate expression, if it is ever truly expressed, in volitional activity. But very much of the religion of most men in every age has centered in the emotions in one form or another; sometimes in the erotic emotions of ancient heathen worship, sometimes in the ecstasy of certain mystic cults both ancient and modern, sometimes in the joy

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(1) Edwin Mortimer Chapman: English Literature in Account with Religion, Pages 6 and 7.

of the camp-meeting, sometimes in the soberer joy of that contemplation in which a man of pure soul and strong mind indulges as he seeks to bring his own innermost life into harmony with the will of that Christ "whom having not seen we love; in whom, though now we see Him not, yet believing, we rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory." (1)

Having to do, as true religion always does, with the deep things of the human spirit, especially on its emotional side, it is natural and indeed inevitable that religion should seek and find expression through literature, especially through poetry, which is in so large measure the voice of the human emotions.

This relation between religion and literature, especially poetry, has been brought about apparently in two ways.

First, those writers whose primary concern was literary, have frequently chosen religion as the subject matter of the literature which they sought to produce. (2) This was true long before the English language even came into being. Homer, AEschulus and

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(1) I. Peter: 1:8

(2) Edwin Mortimer Chapman: English Literature in Account with Religion, page 22 ff.

Sophocles not only dealt with religion, sometimes as a side issue, but especially the two great tragedians named had religion as their central theme and subject matter more than once.

When we turn to English literature before the twentieth century, a mere catalogue of names in which religious interests were prominent or predominant shows the importance of religion as the subject matter of literature, especially of poetry. Spenser, Milton, Vaughan, Crashaw, Cowper, Tennyson, Browning, Clough, Arnold--all these and many more dealt with religion, from the standpoint either of faith or of doubt, of Christianity or of question.

And in the twentieth century, which has seen such a transformation in poetry along so many lines, religion still bulks large as the subject matter of poetry. Masfield, Brooke, Seeger, Giovannitti, Oppenheim, Millay, Sandburg, Lindsay, Robinson, Thompson, Hardy--the list is almost interminable--have written in some cases little and in other cases much which has religion positive or negative as the heart of its subject matter.

But there is another and more vital way in which religion and literature come into relation, and that is the turning of the heart toward literature,



especially poetry, in order that it may find expression for its religious or anti-religious thoughts and feelings.

Sometimes the interest seems to be predominantly intellectual rather than emotional or volitional. There may be a question as to which was the predominant motive of Milton in writing *Paradise Lost*, the religious or the literary. If his chief motive was the religious, it seems to have been an intellectual rather than an emotional one. He declares his purpose to be to "justify the ways of God to man." (1) And when Pope turns to the consideration of man in his moral and spiritual aspect, his purpose, so far as it was religious rather than literary, was the same, and similarly expressed, to "vindicate the ways of God to man." (2)

But in most cases where religion seeks to express itself through literature, it is the emotional rather than the intellectual which is dominant. The heart is full of love or awe, of fear or gratitude, of veneration or adoration to the deity, of repentance over sin or of aspiration for higher and holier

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(1) John Milton: "Paradise Lost," Book I, v.26

(2) Alexander Pope: "Essay on Man," Epistle I, v.16

character and life, of gratitude for personal salvation or desire for the social good: and all these emotions find expression in poetry. Or emotions of a far different sort may be stirred, either by observation or by contemplation, and the wounded heart may cry out with the pain it feels in sympathy with other human hearts, or scream in protest over the evil of the world, whether that evil appears in industrial and social injustice, in the real or supposed acquiescence of the church in these evils, in the inevitable cruelty of the whole order of nature, or what not.

Religion in  
English Poetry  
Preceding Twen-  
tieth Century.

It is interesting to note some of the English poets of centuries preceding the twentieth who have had religion as a prominent if not a predominant interest in their poetry, and thus to view hastily the poetical background for our present day religious poetry. While much of the poetry of the present century has tried hard to cut itself off from earlier influences, it is, of course, impossible but that the main currents of English poetry in the past should still flow in some measure through all the channels of the poetry of the present.

Spenser is the "burning and shining light"

of the sixteenth century, and "The Faery Queen," his greatest work, rich as it is in pure poetry, cannot be fully appreciated except as the reader grasps its allegorical significance. Spenser is writing of morals and religion, and aside from the richness of his music, there is much that can be said of the religious significance of his work.

Three widely variant tendencies appear in three poets of the following century, Vaughan, Crashaw and Milton.

Though Vaughan sought and found most of his fame through his production of religious verse, he had written some decidedly secular things before this religious fame came to him. And his poetry, even his religious poetry, is of a mystic sort which does not make the sharp distinctions which a Milton would make, for instance, between Creator and creation. Canon H. C. Beeching says of Vaughan, "(It is) undoubtedly the mystical element in Vaughan's writing by which he takes rank as a poet. It is easy to see that he has a passion for Nature for her own sake, that he has observed her moods: that indeed the world is to him no less than a veil of the eternal spirit, whose presence may be felt in any, even the smallest

Calvinism, while softened somewhat, finds its expression in such words as

"Some I have chosen of peculiar grace,  
Elect above the rest," (1)

and the words that follow. In other ways Milton shows intense religious feelings and clear-cut religious concepts, though these differ widely from the religious interests which are paramount today.

The eighteenth century brought out no such luminary as Milton, but the century is not without religious significance. The work of Pope has already been mentioned. Johnson, suffering soul that he was nearly all his days, never lost faith in God nor in himself. Cowper, insane at times and at times merely abnormal, wrote hymns which are still sung, the doggerel which poses in so many hymn-books as religious poetry not having entirely displaced the classics of English hymnology. Blake, the inspired mad-man, touches religion at a thousand points.

Perhaps every century considers itself the most important in a millenium. Certain it is that the nineteenth century might well have considered itself of more than ordinary consequence; when one recalls the tremendous mental readjustment of the last century

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(1) John Milton, "Paradise Lost," Book III ; v. 183, 184

it is not to be wondered at that to many those were the times that tried men's souls. Thousands felt the foundations of their lives crumbling, their theological corner-stones being moved out of their places, their whole mental framework apparently going to pieces.

Science spoke with a loud voice in the nineteenth century. Darwin's theory was so young as to be insolent, at least as that theory was advocated by many a disciple who lacked both Darwin's clear sight and his humility. Many a young man knew more than all the wisdom of his fathers, knowing many things which were not true, and many things which were true but essentially false as they were interpreted. The foolish were not seeking the place of readjustment, and the wise had not yet found it. Dogmatism was still taking its own interpretation of truth for truth itself, and fighting for the interpretation instead of seeking to find the truth. Criticism was attacking interpretation, which when it had overcome, it thought it had won a glorious victory. And though truth was never in danger, and could never be destroyed, it was true then as it is true now, that many a soul could be destroyed by misunderstanding or failing to understand the truth.

It was inevitable that the stress and struggle of the mental world of the nineteenth century



should show itself in the poetry of the period. And the experiences of the ordinary thoughtful man were the experiences of the poets: some never got above the fog of doubt and fear and dissention; while some made their way up through the fog into a clearer and a brighter and a fairer light, and found that even the very clouds through which they had passed added to the glory of their visions when the light of faith shone on the clouds of doubt.

Matthew Arnold (1822-1888) and Arthur Hugh Clough (1819-1861) may perhaps stand as typical representatives of those who longed to have faith, but who doubted. Perhaps neither of these was primarily a poet, though each has written good poetry. Certainly each of them was looked upon in an unjustly hostile spirit by many who held at that time a form of faith which had to pass to something better and truer.

Arnold's ancestry and training were of the finest, enough to crush out originality of any ordinary sort, and in many ways he showed a tendency to "follow the beaten path." But he was forced to believe many things which were heresy to his generation; and when he reduced Providence to "a stream of influence not ourselves which makes for righteousness," it is not

to be wondered at that the orthodox considered him a dangerous man and his teaching, in prose or verse, sinister and objectionable.

There is something pathetic in the figure of Clough, longing to believe, yet doubting. He, too, had to be classed with the theological Ephraimites. He could not say "shibboleth," and he did not try. "His verse has upon it the melancholy and the perplexity of an age of transition. He is a skeptic who by nature should have been with the believers. He stands between two worlds, watching one crumble behind him, and only able to look forward by the sternest exercise of faith to the reconstruction that lies ahead in the other." (1)

This reconstruction was found, or at least in their own spirits anticipated, by the two greatest luminaries of English Poetry in the Victorian Age, Tennyson and Browning. Both of these felt the stress which the struggle between the new science and the old religion put upon the minds of all thoughtful men. But both made their way though their doubts to a place of faith.

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(1) Encyclopedia Britannica, Vol. 6, p. 561

In Tennyson's "In Memoriam" especially is seen this struggle between doubt and faith, and there are few better examples than Tennyson of the sort of man he describes:

"He fought his doubts and gathered strength,  
He would not make his judgment blind,  
He faced the specters of the mind  
And laid them: thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own;  
And Power was with him in the night  
Which makes the darkness and the light,  
And dwells not in the light alone." (1)

Tendencies

Illustrated

by Hardy,

Henley and

Thompson

And when the twentieth century dawned, the three who were probably the most prominent among the living poets, Thomas Hardy, William Ernest Henley and Francis Thompson, were marked by their attitude toward religion.

Henley was pronouncedly pagan. The Christian's God is as foreign to his religious ideals, if they can be called religious, as "Invictus" is unlike Paul's "Fight the good fight of faith."

Thompson was intense in his presentation of the faith of the Christian. To him faith was no mere

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(1) Alfred Tennyson: "In Memoriam," Poem XCVI

academic question of theology, but a matter of vast practical importance for everyday living.

"But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)  
Cry; and upon thy so sore loss  
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder  
Pitched between heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,  
Cry, clinging heaven by the hems,  
And lo, Christ walking on the water  
Not of Gennesareth but Thames." (1)

Thomas Hardy was a novelist in the nineteenth century but a poet in the twentieth, a poet whose spirit is such that his true poetic worth will not readily and generally be appreciated. While not the pagan that Henley is, Hardy is a religious pessimist. He is sure that it is useless to pray to God, and that it is the task of thoughtful men to banish from the world the God who is the creature of man's own falsely-working mind. He "is not content with banishing God from the realm of modern thought; he is not content merely with killing Him; he means to give Him decent burial with fitting obsequies. (2) "God's Funeral" was written in 1908-10, and the following lines show with sufficient clearness Hardy's attitude toward what he considers the false faith of the common man:

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(1) Francis Thompson; "In No Strange Land."

(2) William Lyons Phelps: The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century, p. 20

"And tricked by our own early dream  
And need of solace, we grew self-deceived.  
Our making soon our Maker did we dream  
And what we had imagined we believed  
Till in Time's starless stately swing  
Uncompromising rude reality  
Mangled the Monarch of our fashioning  
Who quavered, sank; and now has ceased to be."  
(1)

With Henley, Hardy and Thompson as the three leading living English poets, the twentieth century dawned. After the seventeenth century with its acceptance of things as they were; after the eighteenth century with its revolutions and its overturnings; after the nineteenth century with its vast material advances and its reawakened wonder, part of which was directed toward the works of God in nature but a large part of which was aroused by the works of man in science and industry: after the voices of Tennyson and Browning had been stilled, the birth of the present century saw Thompson writing poetry that was intensely religious, Hardy producing verse that was definitely antagonistic to conventional religion, and Henley singing songs that were frankly and joyously pagan.

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(1) Thomas Hardy: "God's Funeral."



Conditions

Moulding

Twentieth

Century

Thought.

Before turning to the more definite discussion of our present day religious tendencies in poetry, it may be well to note some of the conditions which have moulded twentieth century thought among English-speaking peoples, in whatever literary form this thought finds expression.

First among these may be mentioned the advance of education and enlightenment, the increased opportunity whereby the child of humblest parentage may become great if he can and will. With all his railings at society and at the America to which he came and in which he continues to live, Giovannitti might well reflect that American educational advantages gave an Italian immigrant the opportunity to become a master of English verse, honored by many who made a literary lion of the former miner boy.

A second moulding influence has been the growth of the great world powers. Of course this growth was largely the work of the nineteenth century. But the twentieth century has seen a development in the British Empire which has been quite as significant as the colonial expansion of the nineteenth. Germany, psychologically wrong here as at practically every other point in her thinking in connection with the Great

War, did not sense this development of an inward oneness more vital and more binding than any merely political bonds. Germany believed that Britain and her dominions and colonies were less than an empire; Germany found that they were more.

This greatness of the British Empire, while it finds its chief voice in Kipling, has moulded the thinking of all Britons, Canadians, Australians, New Zealanders, and all the rest. "The White Man's Burden" is a matter of which English-speaking men, and especially citizens of the British Empire, must think.

Not until the twentieth century has America really emerged to a place of world power. But today, whether we favor it or not, we must think of the great responsibility of America in world affairs.

The conquest of the world by man is another thought-moulding influence of today. The advancement which was the wonder of the nineteenth century has continued to increase in geometrical ratio during the twentieth. The aeroplane, the radio, radium, a host of marvels have been added to the wonders of that last century. And human thought has been moulded by all these.

But with this conquest of the forces of nature has not gone an equitable distribution of the fruits of

genius and of labor. The rich have in many cases grown richer without effort, while in many cases the poor have grown poorer in spite of industry. A growing sense of economic injustice is a great moulding influence in modern thinking.

Democracy has grown in the twentieth century, even before the days of the Great War. This growing democracy has had its share in shaping the thinking of today.

The Great War itself shook every thinking man on earth. The very foundations were tested, and things that were as fundamental in men's thinking as the theory of gravitation were put to the test as though objects should suddenly begin to fly from the earth into space. The mind and heart of one man were paralyzed, and he stood bewildered and benumbed, unable to think or feel. His neighbor was mentally shell-shocked by the world-upheaval, but his heart was more keenly sensitive than ever. His whole spiritual being had become feeling. Another man had his feelings mercifully paralyzed, while his intellectual activities became keener, clearer, stronger than ever. Still another type of man found both his mind and his heart quickened by the cataclysm, and keener thinking and stronger feeling resulted. On the whole, however,

the Great War has resulted thus far in less real poetry and much less religious poetry than was to have been expected.

And now the world faces its task of reconstruction. With so great and apparently so insoluble problems as those of today, all thinking men must pause; some devout thinkers turn their thoughts god-ward.

Specific  
Questions.

When we come to a more specific consideration of the religious tendencies of our twentieth century English poetry, a host of questions immediately crowd up for answer. How large is the religious element in present day English poetry? Is it personal? If so, is it predominantly experimental or contemplative? Is it predominantly social rather than personal? Is it "orthodox" or "heterodox?" Is it chiefly Christian or pagan? In what authors is the religious element most prominent? Around what subjects does it chiefly center? War, personal danger, personal experience, social welfare, home, church, state? What are some of the chief elements entering into it? Unconventionality, irreverence, satire of anthropomorphism, opposition to Christianity, paganism, fatalism, association with art, personal faith, love of humanity, hope for a better world?

Tentative Clas-

sification.

Christian, Anti-

Christian and

Pagan.

The effort to analyze and classify our present day religious tendencies in poetry is attended with no little difficulty, first because classes in so subtle a thing as religion fade into each other or even overlap; and second because certain tendencies on which it is difficult to base a classification run through and modify widely different classes of religious thought and expression.

A classification which readily suggests itself is the division of poetry which bears upon religion into the three classes suggested by the attitudes of Thompson, Hardy and Henley at the beginning of the century, taking Thompson as the exponent of Christianity, Hardy as the representative of opposition to Christianity and even to religion in a still broader sense, and Henley as the pagan. Most of the religious tendencies of today can be made to fall into such a classification.

Tendencies

not Used as

Basis of

Classification

But there are tendencies which strike through this classification and perhaps some of these should be considered before taking up the main divisions of the subject.

One of these tendencies, which finds expression



in poetry which bears no close relation to religion, as well as in the religious poetry, is the spirit of revolt. Sometimes this spirit is little more than an attitude of mild protest. Sometimes it goes to an extreme of opposition to religion, government, industrial institutions, social traditions, and even to the laws of common morality.

In many ways this spirit of revolt manifests itself. Many poets of today choose subjects which would have seemed in their very nature to be excluded from poetic treatment. "Chicago--hog butcher for the world" would not have been deemed a poetic subject to a mid-Victorian. The poet of protest today chooses his subjects as he pleases, and often pleases to choose subjects which to many are shocking and unaesthetic. To the poet of protest, however, there are no conventions in choice of material. He must be as free to choose the dung-hill as the throne.

The poetry of protest not only accepts but seeks new means of expression. The most obvious manifestation of this is perhaps vers libre, polyphonic prose, or whatever name is given to the effort to find poetical expression without the use of conventional rhythm. Sometimes the protest is so manifest that the reader cannot avoid the feeling that the author

is making a definite, conscious effort to avoid the regular meters into which the words would fall if they were permitted to do so. Some of Amy Lowell's poetry illustrates this well.

But there is another effort to avoid the conventions quite as pronounced as the choice of free verse as an outward form. This is the use of language which is to many readers shocking, to many disgusting, to some highly expressive and poetical. Possible no better example of this can be found, in the more rugged of present day writers, than Carl Sandburg's

"You come along----tearing your shirt----  
yelling about Jesus.

Where do you get that stuff?

What do you know about Jesus? (1)

It is natural that this spirit of revolt should be manifested in other ways than in choice of subject and expression. It appears as opposition to the existing order in social, industrial, political and religious affairs and institutions.

A tendency related to this spirit of revolt, and in part though not entirely identical with it, is the sense of social and industrial injustice. This also strikes through our general classification. There are pagan poets who burn with a sense of the injustice

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(1) Carl Sandburg: "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter."

of the present social order. There are opponents of Christianity who nevertheless long for industrial justice. And one of the most marked elements of the Christianity of today is its emphasis on the social gospel.

A volume could be written upon the social aspects of the poetry of today. A volume has been compiled a large share of the contents of which consists of modern poems of England and America, dealing almost exclusively with the matter of industrial injustice. (1) It seems best to treat this sense of industrial injustice under the head of Christianity, since its best elements appear to center there.

Determinism is another element which bulks large in the poetry of today which is related to religion. Seeger, who is a consistent pagan, expresses it again and again, most completely, perhaps, in "Maktoob." Masfield, even in "The Everlasting Mercy" and especially in "The Widow in the Bye Street," clearly voices the same ideal, perhaps nowhere more strikingly than in that example of extreme concentration,

"Mate, and the king's pawn played." (2)

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(1) The Cry for Justice; A compilation by Upton Sinclair.

(2) John Masfield: "The Widow in the Bye Street."

Even Service's expressions of determinism, free as his poems usually are from real religious significance, are not without their bearing on religion, for instance,

"If God made me in His image, sure He put the devil inside." (1)

Another marked characteristic of present day poetry is the discovery of God, especially in nature, without any direct reference to Christ, either by way of loyalty or opposition. Sometimes this is apparently pure paganism, and no other god is found than Pan. Sometimes it is Jehovah whose heart beats under the sod and whose voice sings in the brook's song and the bird's song or shouts in the surge of the sea or the rumble of the thunder, though it is the Jehovah of the Hebrew, not the Immanuel of the Christian. Sometimes the God whom nature reveals is none other than that God who fully reveals Himself in the face of Jesus Christ, though it is His revelation in nature, not in His Son, with which the poet deals: His incarnation in grass and flowers, in winds and stars, in human hopes and aspirations, rather than His incarnation in the Babe of Bethlehem and the Man of Galilee.

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(1) Robert Service: "The Parson's Son."

Classification  
with Reference  
to Christianity

But though these tendencies and others which might be named run through very much of the religious poetry of to-day, paying no heed to any classifications which we can make, there is real reason for classifying all our religious tendencies in present day poetry with reference to Christianity. The English-speaking peoples are nominally Christian. Our moral codes are supposedly Christian. Religiously Christianity is the most important if not by far the largest element in our civilization.

What, then, are the principal tendencies of twentieth century English poetry as they relate themselves to Christianity? Here as in other realms, the modern poet has thrown away tradition and speaks as he pleases.

The Pagan  
Element

The pagan element of our present day poetry may be first considered. To most readers paganism will probably connote that worship of nature which finds such beautiful expression in Seeger, for instance. But there is a larger sense in which any poet may be considered a pagan who evidently worships any of the heathen gods.

Seeger is a worshipper of Beauty and Love,



especially sensual love. His chief goddess is Venus, whom he expects one day to displace Christ as the object of human adoration. Witness his words:

"Above the ruins of God's holy place  
Where man-forsaken lay the bleeding rood,  
Whose hands, when men had craved substantial food,  
Gave not, now folded when they cried, Embrace,  
I saw exalted in the latter days  
Her whom west winds with natal foam bedewed,  
Wafted toward Cyprus, lily-breasted, nude,  
Standing with arms outstretched and flower-like  
face.  
And sick with all these centuries of tears  
Shed in the penance for factitious woe  
Once more I saw the nations at her feet,  
For Love shone in their eyes, and in their ears  
Come unto me, Love beckoned them, for lo!  
The breast your lip abjured is still as sweet.

(1)

It might be considered sufficient to classify Seeger as a worshipper of Venus only, were it not that he worships also the beauties of nature apart from the beauties of fair women. So pronounced is his nature-worship that it would seem to be necessary to include some other goddess in his pantheon, perhaps Astarte. He has few gods, perhaps a refined Bacchus, and a modified Mars.

Sara Teasdale would not like, perhaps, to be called a pagan. But she certainly reveals little of striking Christianity in her poetry. She does not attack Christianity. Yet she is a devout worshipper at the

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(1) Alan Seeger: "Sonnet XV."

shrine of Beauty and Love. But it is no beauty of nature which she worships; her poetry is pitifully lacking here, her "Night in Arizona" standing all too solitary as a poem where Nature touched Sara Teasdale's heart--and even here it was with a sense of stricken terror and sadness that her heart was touched. Sara Teasdale is no worshipper of Astarte. Nor is she a worshipper of Venus--Venus is too coarse, too sensual, too unbecamáng-ly a goddess of the flesh. Sara Teasdale is a monotheist, her god being a god of love, clothed in conventional twentieth century garments, intense but very proper in his love--no boy Cupid, no woman Venus, but a very restrainedly passionate man-god of Love.

"H. D.," who was Hilda Doolittle, now Mrs. Richard Aldington, however much or little she may mean in other phases of poetry, has little religious significance except as she represents the new paganism. The same may be said of John Gould Fletcher and others of the ultra-modern school.

It is difficult to place Edgar Lee Masters religiously, as it is difficult properly to evaluate him poetically. He is a hater of hypocrisy, an iconoclast in poetic form, and a poet, who "hints at a new beauty, a differing religious concept," rather than

actually expressing them. (1) His thought has apparently passed through three stages since the days of his tacit acceptance of traditional views: first, the stage in which the old beliefs were going; second, the stage in which the old beliefs were largely gone, with no adequate new beliefs to take their place, a period of travail and of cynicism; third, a stage in which a new birth of beauty occurs. (2) Just how accurate it would be to class Masters with the pagans may be doubted; but he seems to belong here rather than with the avowed enemies of Christianity or the poetic advocates of it, in whatever form they speak.

However, in the world of poetry there is no clear-cut line between Christian and pagan, between the worshipper of God who reveals Himself in His world and the worshipper of the world back of which may or may not be a God who should be worshipped above all. "The glory of the celestial is one, and the glory of the terrestrial is another," (3) but when seen through the eyes of a poet they are likely to fade into each other and become with difficulty distinguishable.

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(1) Amy Lowell: Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, p. 142

(2) See Amy Lowell: Tendencies in Modern American Poetry,  
page 140, 141.

(3) I Corinthians 15:40

W. J. Turner says:

"The mind of the people is like mud,  
From which arises strange and beautiful things,  
But mud is none the less mud  
Though it bear orchids and prophesying kings,  
Dreams, trees and water's bright babblings.

o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"It is strange that a little mud  
Should echo with sounds, syllables and letters,  
Should rise up and call a mountain Popocatepetl;  
And a gree-leafed wood Cleander." (1)

Does he see nothing <sup>back</sup> of the mind of man except  
the bare forces of nature? Is he a pagan worshipping mere  
life-force?

J. D. C. Pellow seems to see much more clearly  
back of nature to the God of nature, when he says:

"Between the erect and solemn trees  
I will go down upon my knees.  
I shall not find this day  
So meet a place to pray.

o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"May a like strength and sweetness fill  
Desire, and thought, and steadfast will,  
When I remember these  
Fair sacramental trees." (2)

Harold Monroe does not apparently see God so  
clearly back of the forces of nature. In his poem,  
"Gravity," he says

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(1) W. J. Turner: "Talking with Soldiers."

(2) J. D. C. Pellow: "The Temple."

"Fit for perpetual worship is the power  
That holds our bodies safely to the earth.

o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"When people talk of their domestic gods  
Then privately I think of you.

o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"When people meet in reverent groups  
And sing to their domestic God,  
You, all the time, dear tyrant (How I laugh)  
Could without effort place your hand among them  
And sprinkle them about the desert." (1)

Does Menro see no God back of this force of  
gravitation which he worships? In another poem he makes  
a poet speak:

"God is a spirit, not a creed;  
He is an inner outworking power:

o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"He is that one Desire, that life, that breath,  
That soul which, with infinity of pain  
Passes through revelation and through death  
Onward and upward to itself again.

o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"Out of the lives of heroes and their deeds,  
Out of the miracle of human thought,  
Out of the songs of singers, God proceeds;  
And of the soul of them his Soul is wrought."

All this sounds well enough as suggesting a  
worship of God, even though seen through a mist of  
pantheism and metempsychosis. But after the disputation

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(1) Harold Menro: "Gravity."



which follows the poet's definition of God, the philosopher enters and says:

"God? God! there is no God." (1)

This idea of God as the living spirit of all things, differing widely from the ordinary concepts of religion, appears again and again in Menro's poetry. He makes another of his characters say:

"----Naught can die;  
All belong to the living soul,  
Makes, and partakes, and is the whole,  
All--and therefore I." (2)

In "Don Juan in Hell" he seems to make this character "an incarnation of the vital forces of the earth, of the positive value and power of life which is in eternal conflict with the religion of negation." (3)  
In this poem Don Juan is made to say:

"This fire of mine  
Was kindled from the torch that will outshone  
Eternity.

o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"There is no heaven such as you would win,  
Nor any other Paradise at all  
Save in fulfilling some superb desire  
With all the spirit's fire." (4)

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- (1) Harold Menro: "God," a dramatic poem.
- (2) Harold Menro: "The Last Abbot."
- (3) Mary C. Sturgeon: "Studies of Contemporary Poets," p. 275
- (4) Harold Menro: "Don Juan in Hell."

Like the Georgian whom Mary C. Sturgeon describes, as distinguished from the Victorian, Monro, "Instead of grieving for a dead or dying system of theology seeks to question the reality which lies behind it." (1)

There is a symbolism strikingly, painfully suggestive in the conclusion of the incident in which Jesus and Cupid meet:

"Marvelous dream!  
Cupid has offered his arrows for Jesus to try;  
He has offered his bow for the game.  
But Jesus went weeping away and left him  
there wondering why." (2)

James Elroy Flecker's poetry is characterized by a cheerful paganism. He does not actively oppose Christianity and "his intercourse with Mohammedanism led him to find more good in Christianity than he had previously suspected." (3) But he still remains, apparently, ~~athe~~cheerful pagan.

There are many other poets of the twentieth century whose poetry has a strong tang of paganism, and yet who do not deserve to be ranked with the pagans. William H. Davies is largely pagan in his love

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(1) Mary C. Sturgeon: Studies of Contemporary Poets,  
p. 221, 222

(2) Harold Monro: "Children of Love."

(3) William Lyon Phelps: The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century, p. 138

for beauty, yet he voices a strong protest against injustice on the basis of the teachings of Jesus. In "The Song of Honour" Ralph Hodgson seems quite as much pagan as Christian, though neither pagan nor Christian of any set orthodox mould. But in "The Mystery" there breathes another note:

"He came and took me by the hand  
Up to a red rose tree,  
He kept His meaning to Himself  
But gave a rose to me.

"I did not ask Him to lay bare  
The mystery to me.  
Enough the rose was heaven to smell  
And His own face to see." (1)

William Lyon Phelps assures us that "The old battle between the body and the soul, between Paganism and Christianity, was never so hot as now, and those who take refuge in neutrality receive contempt. We Christians believe that our Leader rose from the dead, and the followers of Pan say their god never died at all." (2) It may be that this struggle is as definite and as deadly as Phelps believes. And yet, without suggesting that there ever was a time "when Pan to Moses lent his pagan horn," or that there ever will be a truce between Christianity and paganism, one may still question whether even paganism may not see

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(1) Ralph Hodgson: "The Mystery."

(2) William Lyon Phelps: The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century, p.5

some things against which Christianity might better never have closed its eyes. At any rate there are poets who can look upon Pan and turn their eyes toward Christ without seeming to feel any incongruity in looking in turn on both.

The Anti-  
Christian  
Element.

While <sup>the</sup> general attitude of the pagan poet seems to be one of worship of the pagan gods without any very specific opposition to Christianity itself, there are those who cannot leave the religion of the Christian without attack. It is not so much the attack of the pagan as it is the attack of the anti-Christian and the atheist.

There are modern poets who either sincerely or as a matter of pose take a position of opposition to God, to all the gods, even to the common ethical conventions. There is a wide variance apparent between the profession and the practice of Charles Erskine Scott Wood, who fairly screams with poetic indignation over the injustices of the social order and cries aloud for bloody revolution, but goes right on making a good, fat living as a corporation lawyer. He rides his Pegasus purely for pleasure, or at least never allows himself to be carried into practices which will land him in prison with his fellow poet-

radical, Giovannitti. This apparent discrepancy between his poetry and his practice may seem to cast a doubt upon the sincerity of his defiance to the gods, but his words are clear enough and defiant enough, of gods and of some moral conventions, for he says:

"As the Desert is defiant unto all gods,  
So am I defiant of all gods.

o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"I will sing a song of bastards,  
The free children of free mothers,  
Oh noble company of bastards,  
Beloved of great nature." (1)

There is much more of the same nature. Wood rails at social injustice, and at the government under which it flourishes; then, apparently grown mad with his own railing, he defies moral restraints, and all the gods who seem to put bonds upon men, whatever those bonds may be.

If this single ambitious poetic effort of Wood has placed him in a false light as to his rebellion against religion, he should write another poem and set himself right.

Reference has already been made to Thomas Hardy and his opposition to the God whom man has made, as he believes. Perhaps he overemphasizes the scientific

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(1) Charles Erskine Scott Wood: "The Poet in the Desert."



turning away from the God of our fathers, for as Phelps remarks, "It is easy to mistake our own world of thought for the thought of the world." (1) Though Hardy may not be right in his mental transformation of scripture, "Resist the Lord and He will flee from you," yet there are not a few who are trying to carry out his idea.

Arturo Giovannitti, who came to America so full of hope for liberty that he was willing to undergo any sacrifice to get to the land of the free, and so full of zeal for Christianity that he was in training at one time for the priesthood, became so violently opposed both to government as it is and to Christianity as it is that he pictured Freedom as a disheveled harlot "between a sergeant of police and a decrepit millionaire" (2) and his attitude toward Christianity is voiced in his cry,

"No holy fire of pentecost  
Can force on me a Savior's love.

o-o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"I want no Jesus Christ to think  
That He could ever die for me." (3)

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- (1) William Lyon Phelps: The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century." page 17
- (2) Arturo Giovannitti: "The Republic."
- (3) Arturo Giovannitti: "Proem."

The Non-Christian      There is not a little religious  
Element--Jewish      poetry of today, and some of it deeply  
Poetry.      religious as well as truly poetical,  
which is not Christian because it is  
Jewish; it worships Jehovah but not Jesus. The Hebrew  
spirit with its depths both of thought and feeling, is  
finding rich and varied expression in the English  
tongue.

Louis Untermeyer, commenting on the poetry  
of Joseph Oppenheim, declares that "The personal feel-  
ing which has its roots in religious passion, is the  
dominant force in most great work." (1) Certainly  
Oppenheim feels this religious passion. And while  
that of David and Isaiah, and his expression differs from  
his passion differs from theirs as much as his day  
differs from theirs, there is manifestly deep religious  
feeling, though not Christian, in such of Oppenheim's  
statements as these:

and      "I will take the Creator within,"

    "O Life, of which I am a part---  
    Named, glorying, Allah, Jehovah, God."

and

    "We are flesh on the way to godhead."

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(1) Louis Untermeyer: The New Era in American Poetry.  
p. 49

Peignant is his poem "Tasting the Earth," and full of religious significance, though by no means Christian. Speaking of the Mother-Globe, he says:

"It was she, container of all griefs  
and the buried dust of broken hearts,  
Cry of the Christs and the lovers and the  
child-stripped mothers,  
And ambition gone down to defeat, and  
the battle overborne,  
And the dream that has no waking." (1)

There has been no inconsiderable quantity of good Hebrew religious poetry produced in recent years, most of which ignores Christ, even when, as above, it speaks of Christs. Florence Kiper Frank's "The Jew to Jesus" is of interest both to Jew and to Christian.

The Christian  
Element.

There is a great mass of present day religious poetry which would be classed as Christian, though it would need to be added that in many cases it is a modified Christianity, sometimes greatly modified. Luther was by the Romanists considered the arch-enemy of Christianity, when the fact was that he was an enemy to non-Christian elements in the church as it then was. And much of the opposition to the church and the institutional side of Christianity is not opposition to Christianity itself, but to its excrescences.

Few tirades of recent years sound harsher than

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(1) James Oppenheim: "Tasting the Earth."

Carl Sandburg's outburst against "Billy" Sunday, which has already been referred to.

It begins:

"You come along----tearing your shirt----  
yelling about Jesus.

Where do you get that stuff?  
What do you know about Jesus?"

It seems as if one of the Yahoos is attacking  
his enemy by vomiting upon him, especially when he says,

"You come along squirting words at us, shaking your  
fist and calling us all ~~dam~~ fools so fierce  
the froth  
slobbers over your lips----always blabbing we're  
all going to hell straight off and you know  
all about it."

But even though the tirade declares

"It was your crowd of bankers and business  
men and lawyers hired the sluggers and murderers  
who put Jesus out of the running," (1)

yet it admits that Jesus Himself never approached anyone  
without making that one better. Even the vitriolic  
Sandburg is attacking not Christ nor Christianity, but  
what he consider/s Sunday's misrepresentation of Christ.

Edna St. Vincent Millay finds God in his  
world and hers, and there is no opposition to Chris-  
tianity in her cry,

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(1) Carl Sandburg: "To a Contemporary Bunkshooter."

"God, I can push the grass apart  
And lay my finger on thy heart." (1)

John Hall Wheelock writes of "The New Christs,"  
and strikes a note that would sound strange and new to  
many a Christian when he says,

"The deep and silent earth--  
Smiles at herself in Jesus' love.  
Christ's love and Homer's art  
Are but the working of her heart." (2)

Untermeyer says of Edwin Arlington Robinson,  
"He sometimes throws away everything but the meaning,  
and keeps that to himself." (3) His meaning seems  
clear enough, however, when he writes:

"No god but in a prophet's lie,  
No faith for honest doubt to keep,"

But he goes on to declare:

"If God be God He is just,  
And if God be God He is Love.  
And though the Dawn be still so dim  
It shows us we have played enough  
With creeds that make a fiend of Him.  
There is one creed and only one  
Which glorifies God's excellence.  
So cherish that His will be done,  
The common creed of common sense." (4)

This is clearly an attack upon certain

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- (1) Edna St. Vincent Millay: "God's World."
  - (2) John Hall Wheelock: "Earth." (Yale Review.)
  - (3) Louis Untermeyer: The New Era in American Poetry.  
p. 112.
  - (4) Edwin Arlington Robinson: "The Children of the Night."



theological tenets held by certain Christians. But it does not seem intended at all as an attack on Christianity as such.

There is a clear Christian note in his sonnet in which, after showing how far the world is still below Christian standards, he cries

"Tell me, O Lord--tell me, O Lord, how long  
Are we to keep Christ hanging on the cross?"  
(1)

And in another brief poem Robinson seems to reach for a very deep and fundamental thing in Christianity, the joy of self-sacrifice. Veiled a bit it is, and spoken in a parable that those who will not see may not see, but that those who will see may see. After describing the action of his friend Cliff Klingenhagen, who pours two glasses, one of wine and one of wormwood, and drinks the wormwood giving the poet the wine, he closes with these words:

"I have spent  
Long time a-wondering when I shall be  
As happy as Cliff Klingenhagen is." (3)

If Edgar Lee Masters read a few poems like this,---as many believe he did, though Amy Lowell

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(1) Edwin Arlington Robinson: "Calvary."

(2) Edwin Arlington Robinson: "Cliff Klingenhagen."

declares she knows that when Masters wrote his "Spoon River Anthology" he had never read a line of Robinson's poetry (1)--the wonder of "Spoon River Anthology" is largely dissipated. One wonders that Masters did not produce even better work, with such inspiration.

Robert Frost is a recorder, not a commentator. His poems show neither paganism nor Christianity for the most part, but are faithful records, whether of the sound of a scythe or of the emotion of a tender-hearted woman toward the returned hired man; whether of the attitude of an old New Englander toward keeping up his fences or of the effect of New England theology and New England isolation upon a morbid mind. But Frost's kindly spirit seems essentially Christian and all his fine feelings, his humanitarian attitude, his genuine love for humanity, count for full face value, since he is, as Untermeyer declares, "the one living poet who never padded a phrase nor larruped an emotion."  
(2)

Exra Pound, with his "Coat of many cultures," has written some things of real religious significance. Perhaps the meaning is not too readily evident when he says:

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(1) Amy Lowell: Tendencies in Modern American Poetry.  
page 180

(2) Louis Untermeyer: The New Era in American Poetry.  
p. 31.

"For God, our God, is a gallant foe  
that playeth behind the veil." (1)

But his meaning seems clear enough when he says:

"No capon priest was the Goodly Fere,  
But a man o'men was He." (2)

The Sense  
of Social  
Injustice.

Perhaps there is no more striking thing in the poetry of today than the keen sense of social and industrial injustice. Some of this as it finds expression in poetry does not seem to relate itself directly to Christianity; some of it, as in the case of Giovannitti and Wood, seems to be associated with opposition to Christianity; but a large part of it seems to connect itself with a feeling of the incongruity of this injustice with the justice of God and the mercy and love which Christianity should exemplify; some of it sees a hope for a better world in the victory of the spirit of Jesus Christ over the spirit of greed and selfishness.

Eunice Tietjens feels a strong social interest in humanity. John Masfield seems to feel a sense that

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(1) Ezra Pound: "Ballad for Gloom."

(2) Ezra Pound: "Ballad of the Goodly Fere."

something is wrong in our social system. Alfred Edward Houseman is a pessimist, in this as in other matters. Wilfred Wilson Gibson is a gloomy realist, who sees the hard lot of the poor, but has no specific indictment to bring against society. Edmund Vance Cook insists that "earth still is run as heaven was" according to older theology, with the blest happy with all their blessings, even though

"Knowing the boiler-room was crammed  
With legions of the suffering damned,"

and gives this injunction:

"To make heaven of greater worth,  
Come on, let's build a better earth."

Margaret Widdemer has a keen sense of the omnipresence of injustice. Walter de la Mare is strongly humanitarian in his interests, but makes no definite revolt. Edwin Markham's "The Man with the Hoe" appeared in 1899, but his attitude did not change with the coming of the twentieth century.

In Wilfred Wilson Gibson this sense of industrial injustice becomes more clearly vocal than in most of his contemporaries. "Daily Bread" has in its poem-preface, these significant words, so applicable to their author:

"And dared the restless deeps that day and night.  
Surge with the life-song of humanity." (1)

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(1) Wilfred Wilson Gibson: Poem-Preface to "Daily Bread."

In "The Stonefolds" he touches the heart with a real sympathy for those who must toil and suffer as the more fortunate economically need not do.

The protest against injustice in the social order is still more clearly voiced and still more closely linked, albeit satirically, with Christianity, in William H. Davies's comment on the treatment of a tramp:

"Since Jesus came with mercy and love  
'Tis nineteen hundred years and five;  
They made that dying man break stones  
In faith that Christ is still alive." (1)

Lascelles Abercrombie goes much farther in his protest and his cry for justice at the hands of God:

"Wilt thou not come again, thou godly sword,  
Into the spirit's hands?

o-o-o-o-o-o-o

" Against our ugly wickedness,  
Against our wanton dealing of distress,  
The forced defilement of humanity.

o-o-o-o-o-o-o

"And shall there be no end to life's expense  
In mills and yards and factories  
With no more recompense  
Than sleep in warrens and low styes,  
And undelighted food?  
Shall still our ravenous and unhandsome mood  
Make men poor and keep them poor?" (2)

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(1) William H. Davies: "Facts."

(2) Lascelles Abercrombie: "Indignation," in "Interludes and Other Poems."



The same idea of the hard lot of the workers is seen in "Deborah;" and in "Seeker" is shown Self as the ultimate god--too sadly true in much of our industrial life.

Vachel Lindsay senses the sadness of our social and economic system, and expresses it frequently. One of the keenest of his poems is the one in which he repeats again and again the statement with which the poem opens,

"Factory windows are always broken."

He points out the fact that other windows are not molested. Chapel windows are not targets for missiles, but

"Factory windows are always broken.  
Somebody's always throwing bricks;  
Somebody's always heaving binders,  
Playing ugly Yahoo tricks."

and he closes with the sage suggestion that something must be wrong, and the satirical remark,

"Something is rotten--I think in Denmark.  
End of the factory window song." (1)

The same sense of wrong and a still deeper love and sympathy for humanity is voiced in his poem, "The Leaden-Eyed."

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(1) Vachel Lindsay: "Factory Windows."

"Let not young souls be smothered out before  
They do quaint deeds and fully flaunt their pride.  
It is the world's one crime its babes grow dull,  
Its poor are ox-like, limp and leaden-eyed.

"Not that they starve, but starve so dreamlessly,  
Not that they sow, but that they seldom reap,  
Not that they serve, but have no gods to serve,  
Not that they die, but that they die like sheep."

(1)

These and many other examples which could be given show that the sense of industrial and social injustice, which has so large a place in the poetry of today, is a large element also in the religious poetry of the present. There is not so general and so clear a conception as the Christian could desire of the principles of Jesus Christ as the solution for the world's ills; but there is a manifest feeling that our social and industrial injustices are out of harmony with a truly Christian order of things.

The Testing  
of Chris-  
tianity

But however strong may be the social emphasis of Christianity, its ultimate basis is always in the individual soul. It may be necessary to Christianize the social order to give the individual a chance to be truly Christian; but no social order can be

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(1) Vachel Lindsay: "The Leaden-Eyed."

truly Christian which is not based on genuinely Christian individual lives.

And it has been extremely difficult for many to maintain their faith during the years of the recent past, and impossible to maintain it unmodified. Not alone the governments of man and the institutions of man but the faith of man has been severely tested during the twentieth century. Mr. Britling is not the only man who has had to see it through. It is devoutly to be hoped that many reached a more satisfactory conclusion than did he.

The testing of our faith causes far more anxiety among many than the nature of the case would seem to warrant. William Butler Yeates has spoken a word on this point well worth hearing: "We must not make a false faith by hiding from our thoughts the causes of doubt, for faith is the highest achievement of the human intellect, the only gift man can make to God, and therefore it must be offered in sincerity."

And there is not lacking in contemporary poetry the criticism of Christianity as at present expressed in creed, embodied in organizations and institutions, and represented or misrepresented in the lives of its professed followers.

Some of these criticisms, which go even to the

point of violent opposition at times, have already been presented. A few more ought to be mentioned.

Rupert Brooke keenly and delightfully satirizes an anthropomorphic conception of God in his poem "Heaven." In this the

"Fish, fly-replete in leafy June,  
Dawdling away their watery noon,"

are made to discuss the "Future to liquidity," the "wetter water, slimier slime" of the future life, the supreme fish "under whose almighty fin the weakest fish may enter in," and closes with the remark,

"In that realm of all their wish  
There shall be no more land, say fish." (1)

Doubtless there are those who take literally such expressions as "God's hand," "God's eye," "God's arm," "God's ear," etc. In many a country Sunday School a heated discussion could be started by the proposition that God does not have physical features, as man does--are we not told that God made man in His own image? But while this is true of some who have not developed real powers of thought, for those who have developed such powers the best that Brooke's poem can do is to reinforce amusingly the statement of Christ that "God is Spirit," not an anthropomorphic being, not a magnified man merely!

The Great War was a terrible blow to religion, as it was to civilization and to ethics. Early in the

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(1) Rupert Brooke; "Heaven."

war one of the boys in the trenches demanded a moral moratorium. It is not too much to say that much of Christendom's religion went into desuetude without any formal declaration of a religious moratorium.

We had been proclaiming a universal brotherhood, not the fraternal paganism which Whitman had shouted to all the world, but a brotherhood based on a recognition of the universal fatherhood of God and the all-embracing love of Christ which makes the whole world kin. But with the coming of the war all this had to be changed. We must be taught to hate the German, whom our God hated. We must go back to our provincial gods. If Christ could still marvel, as He marveled while here on earth at the unbelief of men, He must have marveled at the ruler and the people of one nominally Christian country praying to God in the name of the Prince of Peace for the divine blessing on their arms and submarines and poison gas that they might the more successfully destroy their enemies, for whom Christ died; while these same enemies were praying to the same God in the name of the same Prince of Peace for a like diabolical favor at the hands of Omnipotence.

But even during the fiercest days of the war there were poets who saw the utter folly of such conceptions of God, such attempts to degrade Him to



a nationalistic deity, fighting at the beck and call of men war-mad, hate-crazed, blood-drunk. Perhaps no better arraignment of this false idea of God has appeared than that of Karle Wilson Baker, who satirizes our nationalistic gods and makes a plea for a true belief in a universal God. (1)

The Fundamental  
Verity of  
Christianity  
Recognized

That Christianity and the Christian church do not always function as they should it requires neither a prophet nor the son of a prophet to see. Saul Kane saw it, and took pleasure in delivering his criticisms in person to the parson. One is left with a sense that part of his criticism is just and his objections well taken; but so vigorously does the parson retaliate that Masfield leaves the impression, doubtless intentionally, that the church on the whole is doing its work in the world fairly well--as well as could be expected with human nature what it is. (2)

Though Masfield sees the inadequacy of the religious beliefs of some of his characters, he does not criticise nor satirize. The great fundamental fact

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(1) Karle Wilson Baker: "Unser Gott," in "Poems of the Great War" by J. W. Cunliffe.

(2) John Masfield: "The Everlasting Mercy."

of Christianity he recognizes; all else is of little consequence by comparison.

Vachel Lindsay saw still more clearly the inadequacy of the religious concepts of many, but he, too, saw clearly the fundamental verity of Christianity, and while he may have satirized, he did not trifle with nor disregard the fundamentals of faith.

What a joy it would be if all of us could see things at times through the eyes of Vachel Lindsay! He has been characterized as "poet, panhandler and pamphleteer;" as "a pagan by intention and a Puritan by intuition;" "a minstrel turned missionary;" "a corn-fed Apollo singing to convert the heathen;" "a revivalist turned socialist;" a man "playing the doxology on a steam calliope;" a man who finally, "hitches a clipped Pegasus to the meeting house." (1) But whatever the comments or epithets, nobody seems to doubt that in Vachel Lindsay a true poet has appeared, who speaks with manly voice, though with peculiar accent.

And Lindsay's poetry is essentially and strongly Christian. He sees the wildness and weirdness

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(1) Louis Untermeyer: The New Era in American Poetry  
pp. 65, 69, 83, 91, etc.

of the

"Fat black bucks in a wine-barrel room,  
Barrel-house kings with feet unstable."

but he cannot "turn from their revels in derision." He sees too clearly what Christianity has done, is doing and is yet to do for these natives of the Congo, so short a time and so short a distance out of savagery. (1)

In "General Booth Enters Heaven" Lindsay has shown us the Christian, Christ-like heart back of the blare and blaa-blaa-blaa of the Salvation Army and its methods. Lindsay laughs and makes you laugh at the unspeakable incongruity of such a group as that which follows Booth parading in such a place as the golden street of heaven. No element of incongruity is missed, from the very first when

"Booth led boldly with his big brass drum--  
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb?)  
The Saints smiled gravely and they said:  
He's come:  
(Are you washed in the blood of the Lamb.)"

But though Lindsay does not miss and does not let you miss any element of incongruity in the picture, the music of the character of the thugs, harlots, drunkards and down-and-outers whom Booth has brought with him to heaven, he leaves you with the confidence

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(1) Vachel Lindsay: "The Congo."

that they are a saved lot of wreckage. And when Christ comes to crown the whole-souled server of humanity, when Booth actually stands in the presence of his Lord, when

"He saw King Jesus, they stood face to face,  
And he knelt a-weeping in that holy place" (1)

Your tears are apt to flow with those of the aged soldier of the cross, and you feel as if you had been, like Moses, upon holy ground.

There is very much of the religious poetry of today which possesses no very peculiar significance because there is in it no peculiar characteristic.

Martha Foote Crow has compiled an excellent anthology of considerable size, "Christ in the Poetry of Today." Much of it is fine, devout, earnest, reverent, possessing just the qualities which we should expect in Christian poetry, and therefore having no peculiar or new significance.

Carolyn Hill has prepared an "Anthology of the World's Greatest Religious Verse," which is expected off the press soon, and the modern material in it is largely of the same sort.

Stephen Phillips is fairly orthodox. Alfred Noyes has Thompson's religious faith. "A. E.," who is George W. Russell, is calm in his trust in God. James

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(1) Vachel Lindsay: "General Booth Enters Heaven."

Stevens writes child rhymes about God, angels and devils so naively as to be almost shocking. Maurice Francis Egan has a deep and pure religious faith.

Robert Underwood Johnson's Quaker training shows in the high moral idealism and sincere religious faith of his poetry. The same may be said of William Dudley Foulke. Richard Burton stands for a cheerful manliness and a cheerful godliness. Anna Hempstead Branch breathes real devotion in "Ora Pro Nobis" and "Lazarus." And many a greater and lesser poet has contributed to the wealth of religious poetry of today which exalts Christ and Christian ideals, and which possess significance but no peculiar or new significance.

"The Ever- It has remained, however, for John  
lasting Mercy." Masfield, in many respects the most  
remarkable literary figure of today, to  
write what is probably the most significant religious poem  
since "The Hound of Heaven." "The Everlasting Mercy" has  
been denounced as immoral and decried as shocking, but  
of its deep religious significance there can be no doubt.

Part of this significance arises out of the  
life and character of the author. Masfield is no kid-  
glove poet, no "curled darling of the court," no theo-  
logically-trained advocate of certain pre-digested religious



tenets. On the contrary, he has had much experience with "life in the raw." He has been long time a sailor before the mast. He has tramped it, not as a gentleman tramp but as a genuine representative of the genus hobo. He has mixed drinks behind the bar, and disposed of drinks with his foot on the brass rail in front. He has fought and poached--and probably tasted of worse sins, as Saul Kane had done. At any rate he had seen men far away from good and God. And when he writes of the transformation of the human by the inflowing of the divine, he is writing out of a deep knowledge of human nature's depravity and need of divine help.

The story of "The Everlasting Mercy" is briefly this: Saul Kane was a very bad boy who grew up into a very bad young man, who before he reached his majority had tasted of almost every sin which has a name, and had become a very thorough-going "tough" and a confirmed petty criminal.

A quarrel with his friend in lawlessness over Kane's trespassing on the poaching grounds which by agreement were to be left to his friend, led to a fight, which was made a prize fight that the fighters might profit by it.

Kane knows he is fighting to defend a lie, and has no heart in it, especially since his corner of

the outdoor ring faces the dark corner of the wood  
where, as he says, he,

"begun poor Nell  
Upon the woman's road to hell."

Kane is getting a beautiful beating when  
his opponent injures his thumb, and Kane at last knocks  
him out and wins the purse. His former friend refuses  
to be reconciled, and promises Kane a licking at some  
future time when

"There'll be no one to watch the clock for you,  
And no convenient thumb to crook for you."

Kane and his partisans go to the public house,  
where they have a night of disgusting debauch. In the  
midst of it, with the rest going off into drunken and  
lascivious sleep, Kane opens the window and leans "out  
of that pig-stye of the fiend." He hears the church bells  
chime, "Holy, Holy, Holy." The call of God's mercy is  
coming to him, drunk and drubbed and drabbed though he  
is.

His crazy, naked run through the town after  
arousing the people with an alarm of fire, his attempted  
rendezvous with "Doxy Jane" who had "thirst for men  
instead of soul," his quarrel with the parson, his  
denunciation by the slattern mother, his drinking at the  
public house in the evening, all these are the unconscious  
struggles of the soul to escape the pursuing grace of

God; all these paroxysms of soul are but preparations for the message of God which is to come with healing to his broken, diseased, devil-possessed spirit.

When the Quaker woman comes into the public house to give her message of grace, Kane, in a last struggle of the fiend within him, offers her the first insult which she has ever received in that den of debauchery. With the calmness and the power arising from the consciousness of God within, the Friend pours out Kane's liquor, gives him a soul-searching personal message and leaves him in the public house, to the companionship of the depraved inn-keeper, his depraved wife, and God.

Into God's outdoors and night goes Saul Kane; but soon he finds a place of acceptance with God, who takes him in to His own companionship and light. The world is transformed for Kane. "Old things are passed away; behold all things are become new." Saul Kane, the worthless, criminal loafer, goes to work, and from that day on lives a changed life, a clean and useful life.

This presentation of a typical Begbie "Twice-Born-Men" conversion as the central theme of so ambitious a poem as "The Everlasting Mercy" by the versatile Masfield, Novelist, essayist, dramatist and

major poet, is a noteworthy thing. Old-fashioned may be the theology of it; the method of the Quaker woman in the public house may be as unconventional as the methods of the Salvation Army as Lindsay suggests them; but there is something deep and fundamental, and Masefield sees it, in this call of God to the sinful soul <sup>this call of the sinful soul to God and God's response;</sup> and the sinful soul's response; <sup>^</sup>this inflow of divine grace and love and mercy in transforming power.

The Victorian Age produced no two English poets to rank with Tennyson and Browning. Perhaps these two wrote no poems more significant than "In Memoriam" and "Saul". The latter voices the age-long, world-wide craving for Christ, for One who, from the God-side, can bridge the chasm between man's weakness and God's strength, between man's defilement and God's holiness. And "In Memoriam" shows a great poet finding a true and abiding faith in an age of doubt and a time of personal distress.

It is too early and we lack perspective to see clearly the relative merits of the poets of the twentieth century. Any effort to evaluate their work is perilous. But perhaps without rashness it may be suggested that Francis Thompson and John Masefield are not pygmies in the group and will not be first forgotten.

And with at least equal confidence it may

be said that if they are to have deathless fame as poets, it will probably be because of "The Hound of Heaven" and "The Everlasting Mercy." These are probably the most significant religious poems in the English tongue since Tennyson's day. The former was written during the last decade of the nineteenth century, but its author continued to write equally devout Christian poetry in the twentieth.

"The Hound of Heaven" is "an epic of the love that will not let us go." (1) Viewed in the light, or perhaps one should say the shadow, of Thompson's life, it possesses seven-fold meaning. Thompson was a failure, a drug-fiend, a down-and-outer. Tattered and dirty and shirtless, wasted and hungry and discouraged, he appeared for the first time before the man who had discovered this genius of the gutters. That God should have sought him, that he should have been the object of this pursuit of divine and infinite love was to Thompson an everlasting wonder. His Masterpiece with its daring and, to some, shocking title, was written out of the white heat of his own heart, out of a clear and grateful realization of "the love that will not let us go." Man was made for God and can find his soul satisfaction nowhere else. And God who made him hunger for his love, thirsts for his devotion, cannot rest contented while



man in his blindness seeks to evade God's love, seeks to escape from God for fear of the great requirements of that high fellowship.

And there is close soul-kinship between "The Hound of Heaven" and "The Everlasting Mercy." Masfield is presenting the same gracious truth from a slightly different angle and in a vastly different way. In Thompson's poem it is the heart that flees from God, through the trackless mazes of the human spirit whose realm is eternity and to whom time and space are nothing; Masfield's poem deals with a very earthly and earthy Saul Kane, in a game-preserve, in a prize ring, in a bawdy saloon. In "The Hound of Heaven" God pursues alone; in "The Everlasting Mercy" His active agent is an earnest Quaker woman. In Thompson's poem the soul seeks to hide in the universe of science, the universe of self-interest, the universe of mighty deeds; in Masfield's poem Saul Kane plunges into debauchery, buries himself in lechery, enfogs himself in blasphemy. But it is in both poems the same God who seeks the human heart until He finds it; it is the same divine love which pursues; the same divine power which transforms and sustains; the same divine spirit which brings about the new creation.

Summary

of the

Discussion

All these varying tendencies which we have considered in the English poetry of today have their significance: the spirit of revolt, the sense of social and industrial injustice, the sense of determinism, the recognition of God, especially in nature, without any reference to Jesus Christ. The various forms which the new paganism assumes are full of interest. The opposition to Christianity or to any other theistic worship is no inconsiderable element, though not the dominant element, in our poetry of today.

But perhaps the most significant thing of all is the great mass of modern poetry which presents the Christian view of life; the great number of poets, some of them of a high order, who find in Christianity that which meets the soul's deepest need. Much of this poetry is critical in its attitude, with no blind acceptance of the traditional point of view simply because it is traditional. In much of it there is a merciless exposure of the existence of things which should not be in the midst of our so-called Christian civilization, whether they exist because of the lassitude or in spite of the energy of the Christian church. Especially keen is the criticism of the unjust and unmerciful industrial and economic and social conditions of today.

But sounding through all the poetic voices of today, and often sounding as loudly as any other and more clearly than any other, is the voice of Christianity in the poetry of the twentieth century, not a blind Christianity, not a complaisant Christianity, but a critical, a struggling, a suffering Christianity, seeking to see the light, struggling toward the light, and singing a song of courage and hope and love and human brotherhood as it moves onward toward the better day.

Poetically the century into which we have come is in marked contrast to the ones which have preceded. It is lacking in appreciation of that which is old. One of its most marked characteristics is its revolt against the immediate past. (1) It is marked by a new paganism which raises science to the emotional level of a religion.(2) The new poetry is "not only closer to the soil but nearer to the soul," and it "expresses itself----in----democracy of the spirit and democracy of speech." "The modern poet is set free from sweeping generality, vague eloquence, preoccupation with the poetic past, the repeating of echoes and glib superficials." (3)

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(1) Amy Lowell: Tendencies in Modern American Poetry, p. 4

(2) Amy Lowell: Tendencies in Modern American Poetry.

(3) Louis Untermeyer: The New Era in American Poetry.  
pp. 9, 11, 13.

With utter freedom, the poet of today speaks out his mind and his heart. Alan Seeger worships love and beauty, even putting sinful, lustful love into his best known poem. Ella Wheeler Wilcox glorifies the illegitimate "war baby" and its sinning, suffering mother. Carl Sandburg vents his spleen on the baseball evangelist. Charles Erskine Scott Wood shouts his defiance to all the gods and the governments. Rupert Brooke satirizes the primitive conception of God which many a man holds. Robert Frost holds a clear mirror up before the austere face of New England, and makes no comment. Thomas Hardy attacks all belief in God. William Ernest Henley gloats in his paganism, James Elroy Flecker is cheerful in his paganism, John Millington Synge is so hopeless of a life beyond the grave that he clings to bodily existence with almost gluttonous passion. (1) Sara Teasdale worships love, and the Jew presents a Jehovah, but no Christ. Harold Monroe sings his religious songs--if orthodox or Christian certainly strangely so. The social and industrial and economic injustices vex the souls of Lascelles Abercrombie, Wilfred Wilson Gibson, William H. Davies, Margaret Widdemer, Edmund Vance Cook, Edwin Markham,

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(1) William Lyon Phelps: The Advance of English Poetry in the Twentieth Century.

Alfred Edward Houseman, Vachel Lindsay, James Oppenheim and many others. But in the face of pessimism and paganism, complaisant disregard of Christianity or active opposition thereto, Edna St. Vincent Millay finds God in His world and hers; J. D. C. Pellow worships under his "fair sacramental trees;" William Dudley Foulke and Robert Underwood Johnson cling to their faith and their high ethical ideals; Richard Burton maintains his cheerful manliness and cheerful godliness; Maurice Francis Egan is upheld by a deep and pure religious faith; George W. Russell remains calm in his Christian confidence, and Vachel Lindsay continues to play the doxology on the steam calliope at the rear of the procession to the New Jerusalem which General Booth is leading with his big bass drum. For its opening years, the twentieth century had the clear voice of Francis Thompson whose experience of God and faith in him found expression in "The Hound of Heaven." Alfred Noyes, from his chair in Princeton University rather than from the gutters of London, voices the same religious faith. And clearer perhaps than any other voice, and coming in a sense as Thompson's did, "out of the depths," we hear John Masefield in "The Everlasting Mercy" testifying in the person of Saul Kane to the power which seeks and heals, which transforms and sustains.



In the poetry of today there are voices of irreligion and of paganism. But God has not left Himself without witnesses, even among poets of the first rank. And it seems likely, as the war and its disturbing influence recede, that the tide of genuinely Christian poetry will rise rather than fall.